



FRIENDS OF THE LEE MEMORIAL LIBRARY

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UPPER SADDLE RIVER



ANNUAL COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIP

Open to All Graduating Seniors Attending Northern Highlands Regional High School

2016 WINNERS

Alexandra Berndt, Allendale

Nicole Steinberg, Upper Saddle River

Awarded for the essay best addressing these questions:

How have public or school libraries shaped your life?

How did the books, materials, programs, or people you encountered there make you into the person you are today and influence who you will become?

Alexandra Berndt, Allendale

Books are my *home*. Books are waking up at five AM, before the sun has sliced through the black of early morning, and finding my mom wrapped in a towel, hair twirled above her head, with her latest reread – its paperback cover soft, worn, and cracked – perched in her hand. Books are laughing until I cried and my stomach cramped, cocooned in the black checkered blanket of my parent's bed next to my mom and learning to read with the Junie B. Jones series. Books are being the only nerd I know that procrastinates on homework by reading – reading everything I can get my hands on – and eventually having to reread and resort to horribly written books to satisfy my addiction. Books are my solace, the escape from the monotony of my life. I find myself obsessed with series, incapable of dealing with the loss of the characters I have come to love. Whether period pieces such as *The Help* and *Revolutionary Road*; whether my childhood favorites, ingrained in indelible ink upon my heart, such as *Harry Potter* and *Percy Jackson*; whether my newest obsessions such as *The Naturals* or *The Selection*, books are the frames through which I understand the world around me. The high expectations I hold, the optimistic values I covet, the pieces of my favorite characters I see in my best friends are clear pieces of my lifelong love of books permeating my life's every aspect.

Libraries are the pinnacle of that love. The quiet clatter of keyboards and the filing of books; the overwhelming sense of calm that accompanies the smell of an aged library book; the distinctive crack of a spine; the quiet flutter of pages; the endless rows of books of perfectly mismatched size and condition, libraries embody both the warmth of a nap on the beach and the high of cold, fresh outdoor air; books calm and clear my head. Libraries and the books they house have made me into the studious, intelligent, honest, kind, brave, compassionate, and curious person I am today. The *Harry Potter* series alone is the root of much of my personality. I idolize Hermione, revere Hagrid and venerate McGonagall. I dream of Hermione's determination, cleverness and loyalty. I crave the guidance and unconditional love of a guardian like Hagrid. My stubborn personality and pursuance of law and sociology in college embody the strength of character and wisdom I admire in McGonagall.

Most distinctly, however, libraries like Lee Memorial have taught me to appreciate the value of a well-loved treasure. For me, newer is almost never better. Many people are endlessly seeking out "the next best thing," believing that the most superior form is always the newest. I, however, am a reverent champion of tradition and a disciple of the 'older is better' creed.

This quirky perspective is a product of how I was raised. My childhood was spent in endless pursuit of antiques. Every Saturday, my sister and I were dragged from shop to shop, fooling around among vintage furniture and trinkets. My grandmother, great aunt, and mother would travel hours to flea markets in my father's 25-year-old '91 Chevy Silverado. My house is an 1870 all-girl's school, with a crawl-space basement and all of the character, creaking floors, layer upon layers of wallpaper, and dust that defines an antique Victorian home. My parents' library cards were swiped more than their credit cards and hours were spent agonizing over which books I would borrow when my mother informed me I would never finish 8 books before their various due dates.

The idea that something becomes outdated the moment it is updated saddens me. I find nothing more soothing than the deep growl of an old pickup, like the 1968 Ford F-100 that I would cut my arm off to own. I am fascinated by the character and vitality that a manual Minolta camera brings to its darkroom-printed photos. In the quest for the next best thing, tradition often gets replaced by a 'been there, done that' attitude. My respect for the past is central to who I am. Others may seek out the latest and greatest, but I find objects and traditions that have withstood the test of time to be a comforting constant in my life.

The library books I covet most are the books that have bested their odds – in tatters, with worn, dog-eared pages, mysterious stains, yellowed and thinning pages, and spines seemingly held together only by the sheer refusal to leave its comrades and determination to make an impression upon just one more person. Library books are proof that some things do last forever. Even when a spine has been cracked for its final time, its unique scent tickled the nostrils of its last reverent reader, the book and its significance dance along the memories of every reader, immortal.

Nicole Steinberg, Upper Saddle River

When I still stood eye-level with the checkout desk, I would hand stacks of chapter books to my mother, gripping the edge of the counter and peering on tiptoe at the growing pile of books that would be temporarily mine. My parents simply could not afford to cater to my out-of-control obsession, to buy ten books a week just to keep me reading. My savior from twenty-four-hour television was, of course, the USR library. As I grew, so did the thickness of the novels I chose, starting with the *Magic Treehouse* series, graduating to *The Mysterious Benedict Society* and working my way up to *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Hence the library became my second home, where I participated in weekend activities, signed up for every read-a-thon, and even slept on occasion. In second grade, I was the only girl at the library's Harry Potter sleepover, held on the midnight release of *The Half-Blood Prince*. I had never stayed up until midnight before, but I said goodbye to my mother and rolled out my purple daisy sleeping bag next to the children's librarian, who praised my bravery and made sure the boys included me. I came home with a half-read copy of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, a calendar, and a chocolate frog.

My love of books earned me a series of nicknames – Matilda, given to me by my third grade teacher, for my voracious appetite for books – Nicole Einsteinberg, by an annoying classmate – Speedy Gonzales, by the librarian I volunteered for due to how quickly I'd finish any project she gave me, from peeling off due date stickers to putting books away behind the checkout counter, which I could finally see over.

I loved to feel as if I was learning something. Whether it was a book of fairy tales, a trashy young adult novel, or an ancient classic, I didn't care, as long as I could feel my mind expanding. I wanted to know everything there is to know about the universe, to feel everything there was to feel – clearly this was a tall order, but I knew the best place to start was among the library stacks. Nothing for me symbolized the endless possibilities of life as much as the towering shelves of differing opinions five minutes from home.

In eighth grade, I applied for a paid position as a page. The head librarian told my mother there were two prerequisites: I had to be fourteen, and I had to have my own library card.

“Her own library card?” My mother laughed. “She’s had one since she was four!”

I spent my working hours for the next few years organizing shelves, mentally bookmarking interesting titles to come back for after the end of my shift, imagining my own name on the spine. Often, I would find myself inspired, pausing every now and then to jot down a thought on the pad of post-it notes in my pocket. By the end of a workweek, I’d have half a story written and half-a-dozen titles to work off of.

Today, I am the girl who reads while walking through the school hallways, razing through three pages every passing period, the girl who totes seven-hundred-page tomes and reads her English textbook for fun. I am the girl who won the senior superlative for “Next Best-Selling Author,” the girl everyone asks for book recommendations. People think I’ve read everything, but my to-read list must be twice as long as my read-already, which I am ever trying to add to. Manjit Kumar’s *Quantum* makes me want to be a physicist, James Michener’s *Space* makes me want to be an astronaut, Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* makes me want to write my own novel. What better than books to broaden one’s horizons? Where else to find such a collection than a library?